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RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 8012

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 6203

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA PRIORITY 0427

RUEHCHI/AMCONSUL CHIANG MAI PRIORITY 7627

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY

RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 000344

SIPDIS

STATE FOR EAP/MLS, NSC FOR WALTON

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF PHUM SMIG TH

SUBJECT: THAILAND: "LET THE MAGIC AMULET BREAK YOUR NECK" -
THAILAND ABUZZ OVER HUN SEN'S LATEST HARSH RHETORIC

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Classified By: Political Counselor George Kent, reason 1.4 (b,d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Thai refusal to allow Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen to bring armed soldiers to visit Ta Muen Thom, border temple ruins long under Thai control, February 8 apparently led to Hun Sen's most recent scathing denunciation of Thai PM Abhisit, with the colorful insults dominating Thai media headlines February 9. Thai officials sought to avoid escalating the rhetoric publicly. However, with Thai attention increasingly on the potential for street unrest in the lead-up to an expected February 26 Supreme Court decision on fugitive former PM Thaksin's frozen assets, some contacts told us that they suspected Hun Sen may have picked the timing of the visit as a favor to Thaksin, whom he has appointed as adviser to his government, to put additional pressure on Abhisit. End summary.

Thai scramble in advance of Hun Sen's border traverse

¶2. (SBU) Thai officials went into crisis planning mode starting February 4, in advance of Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen's planned tour of hot spots along the Thai-Cambodia border on February 6-8. PM Abhisit convened a rare night executive session of the Thai National Security Council to consider two issues: domestic security arrangements in advance of expected red-shirt protests, and how to handle Hun Sen's border traverse, in particular his request to visit contested temple ruins at Ta Muen Thom, long under Thai control accompanied by up to 20 armed military escorts. Abhisit and the NSC directed an interagency team of military commanders, local governors, and MFA officials to meet Hun Sen February 6 and 7 near Preah Vihear temple and in the so-called "Emerald Triangle" between Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. Royal Thai Armed Forces Border Division Commander LTG Nipat Thonglek told us February 5 that Thailand would reinforce the expected border visits locations with additional troops to prevent any potential mischief-making.

¶3. (C) In the aftermath of the Preah Vihear visit, Si Sa Ket Governor Rapi Phongbuphakit told us February 8 that he had talked with Hun Sen for five minutes as a member of the Thai delegation led by Second Area army Commander LTG Veerawit Jornsumrit. Rapi said that Hun Sen had expressed his desire to see the border situation return to normal and that he had

showed no interest in visiting the 4.6 square kilometers of disputed territory adjacent to the temple. (Note: The International Court of Justice ruled that Preah Vihear is located in Cambodian territory in 1962; the decision did not address the contested area adjacent to the temple, which is claimed by both countries. End Note.)

Final leg canceled, Hun Sen blasts Abhisit, Thai media

¶4. (SBU) Thai officials announced publicly that Hun Sen would be welcome to visit the Ta Muen Thom ruins February 8, but only as a tourist; he would not be allowed to bring 20 armed military escorts. Colonel Thanet Wongcha-um, Chief of Staff for the Suranaree Task Force that oversees the Thai side of the disputed border, told us February 9 that Thai officials had also advised Hun Sen not to visit the ruins due to the presence of approximately 150 protesters from the People's Alliance for Democracy, who were opposing Hun Sen's visit. Hun Sen chose not to visit on those terms, Thai FM Kasit's Secretary Chavanond Intarakomalyasut told the Thai media, which reported that Hun Sen instead went to a village four kilometers away to rename it after Ta Muen Thom. (note: Ta Muen Thom temple is claimed by both nations but, unlike Preah Vihear, the Thai military has maintained control over the area around the temple for decades.)

¶5. (SBU) Thai headlines February 9 focused on Hun Sen's subsequent harsh denunciation of the Abhisit government, with DPM Suthep, also a target of Hun Sen's rhetoric, suggesting to the Thai media that the outburst came as a result of Hun Sen's aborted attempt to visit the runs. The speech as reported in the media included a variety of insults and curses directed towards Abhisit, with Hun Sen calling on

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Abhisit to tell the truth about Thai troops in the area around Preah Vihear or risk letting "magic amulets break your neck; may you be shot, be hit by a car, may you be shocked by electricity, or shot by misfired guns."

¶6. (SBU) According to reports, Hun Sen also referred to Abhisit as a "power thief," "crazy," and without "family honor" for denying the Cambodian accusation that Thai troops had invaded Cambodian territory in July 2008. Hun Sen also lashed out at Thailand's two English language newspapers distributed throughout mainland Southeast Asia, the Bangkok Post and the Nation, for presenting what he claimed was false information about his visit to the border areas and for describing his visit as inappropriate.

Thai reaction cautious, with some private suspicions

¶7. (SBU) RTG officials were quick to respond to Hun Sen's reported statements, though they sought to calm the waters February 9. FM Secretary Chavanond initially condemned Hun Sen's comments, suggesting they would make it difficult for Thailand to restore normal diplomatic relations with Cambodia. However, Chavanond insisted that Thailand would make every effort to avoid a conflict between the two nations. Government Acting Spokesman Panitan told the media February 9 that Thailand would not respond in kind to Hun Sen's rhetoric, and that the international community could draw its own conclusions. For his part, DPM Suthep said Thailand would decline to respond to Hun Sen's allegation of a Thai "invasion" of Cambodian territory, and told the media he would not speculate about links between Hun Sen and red-shirts calling for the downfall of the Abhisit government.

¶8. (C) Private commentary to us also downplayed the possibility for an escalation of border tensions, though some suspicions remained about potential links between Hun Sen, Thaksin, and the upcoming red-shirt protests. Dr. Chanawit Kasetsiri, a retired professor at Thammasat University, told us that he believed that Thailand would not allow the dispute

to lead to a military conflict. Both Dr. Chanawit and Senator Prasong shared their suspicion with us, however, that former PM Thaksin had pushed Hun Sen to make this border traverse with the hopes of further instigating the Thai-Cambodian conflict, open another front in Thaksin's effort to bring down the Abhisit government, and thus open the door for Thaksin's return. DPM Suthep publicly tried to put a more positive spin on the matter, voicing hope to the media that Thai-Cambodian relations would improve once problems related to Thaksin were resolved.

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